

Special Reports: Science & Technology

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NASA, NOAA team up for unmanned aircraft tests

By: North County Times wire services

□EDWARDS AFB - Can unmanned aircraft be used effectively for Earth Science experiments? The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, in cooperation with NASA's Dryden Flight Research Center and General Atomics Aeronautical Systems Inc., are seeking to answer that question during a series of atmospheric and oceanic research flights off the California coastline this spring.

The flight demonstration project, using General Atomics' Altair remotely operated unmanned aerial vehicle, marks the first time NOAA has funded a UAV Earth science demonstration mission.

"The experiment is aimed at introducing a new era of science by using a UAV in an operational environment to fill research gaps in critical areas, such as weather and water, climate and ecosystem monitoring and management," according to a statement released by Dryden, which is based at Edwards Air Force Base.

"UAVs will allow us to see weather before it happens, detect toxins before we breathe them and discover harmful and costly algal blooms before the fish do -- and there is an urgency to more effectively address these issues," said Conrad C. Lautenbacher Jr., Under Secretary of Commerce for Oceans and Atmosphere and NOAA Administrator.

The Altair, whose development was funded in part by NASA, is carrying a payload of instruments for measuring ocean color, atmospheric composition and temperature and surface imaging during six flights totaling about 53 hours of flight time.

The flights, during late April and early May, will be flown at altitudes of up to 45,000 feet and as long as 20 hours in duration, according to Dryden's Beth Hagenauer.

Three missions will be focused on the Channel Islands area off southern California; the others will extend further out over the Pacific Ocean, she said.

Objectives of the experiment include evaluating UAVs for future scientific and operational requirements related to NOAA's oceanic and atmospheric research, climate research, marine sanctuary mapping and enforcement, nautical charting, and fisheries assessment and enforcement.

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"This mission is truly historic in that it marks the first time that scientific payloads of this quality and complexity have been flown in a remotely operated aircraft system," said Thomas J. Cassidy Jr., president and chief executive officer of General Atomics Aeronautical Systems.

The Altair, a high-altitude civil derivative of General Atomics' Predator B military UAV, was designed for scientific and commercial research missions. It has an 86-foot wingspan and can reach altitudes up to 52,000 feet and remain airborne for more than 30 hours.

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